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Re-Intermediation: Distribution, Online Access, and Gatekeeping in the Digital European Market

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New Studies

Release Groups & The Scene: Re-Intermediation and Competitive Gatekeepers Online

Virginia Crisp, King's College London

Abstract

While recent years has witnessed the proliferation of new modes and methods of informal distribution, a certain sector of unauthorized media distribution, namely 'The Scene', has been subject to surprisingly little academic consideration. 'The Scene' is a collective title for several self-identified 'release groups' who collaborate to remove copyright protection from media artefacts (e.g. games, software, films) and repackage them into 'releases' for distribution online. Despite assertions that the Scene is the source of 'most' pirate copies circulating online, the role these online gatekeepers play in selecting what is 'released' into unauthorized online distribution networks has yet to be thoroughly explored. As such, this paper will examine how the practices of The Scene intersect with the wider unauthorized distribution ecology and how they might act as both tastemakers and gatekeepers in an online context that is frequently perceived to be 'free', 'open' and untroubled by traditional intermediaries. In doing so, the paper will consider how the practices of the Scene are emblematic of the wider processes of re-intermediation that are being felt across the audio-visual industries.

In recent years, the growth of the Internet has enabled the proliferation of new modes and methods of what Ramon Lobato has called *informal* distribution.[1] That is, actions that facilitate the dissemination of media content outside of official channels — most commonly referred to as media piracy. This has taken place over the last twenty years via various distribution outlets, for example: newsgroups, private filesharing communities, bittorent listing sites (e.g. The Pirate Bay), Direct Download Link (DDL) sites (e.g. Megaupload), streaming sites, and filesharing software (e.g. Napster). In this time academia has seen a concomitant rise in discussions of these new avenues for informal circulation. However, an aspect of the informal distribution ecosystem that is variously

[1] Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (Basingstoke: BFI Palgrave, 2012).

referred to as the 'filesharing Scene', the 'Warez Scene' or simply, the 'Scene', has been subject to surprisingly little scrutiny within these academic discussions of media piracy. Indeed, the Scene is, according to Décary-Hétu, Morselli and Leman-Langois, the least academically researched hacker community.[2] This is despite the existence of numerous claims about the reach and influence of the Scene.[3] As such, this article seeks to redress this lack of research by interrogating: 1) what exactly the Scene is, and 2) how the practices of the Scene intersect with the wider online informal distribution ecology. In doing so, this article will demonstrate how the Scene play a significant role in gatekeeping access to cultural goods within the online informal distribution ecology.

In order to explore these questions, this work will refer to both existing academic literature regarding the Scene and my own experience of studying informal online distribution over the last decade.[4] In order to examine the nature and structure of the Scene, this paper will also draw upon data gathered from the website scenerules.org, which provides a repository of Scene rules from 1996 to the present. This examination will be, in part, used to demonstrate that while the broader 'Scene' operates across mediums, it is actually made up of varying sub-scenes that concern themselves with different mediums and formats and operate according to different rules and standards.

The way practices of the Scene intersect with the wider online informal distribution ecology and how these interactions ultimately position the Scene as gatekeepers of online distribution, will be illustrated through my own model of the informal distribution ecology. This model will illustrate how the gatekeeping position of the Scene is secured because of the pivotal role it plays in controlling

[2] David Décary-Hétu, Carlo Morselli and Stéphane Leman-Langois, 'Welcome to the Scene: A Study of Social Organization and Recognition among Warez Hackers', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency,* 49.3 (2012), 359–82 (p. 361).

[3] See Maria Eriksson, 'A different Kind of Story: Tracing the Histories and Cultural Marks of Pirate Copied Film', *Technoscienza: Italian Journal of Science and Technology Studies*, 7.1 (2016), 87–108 (p. 92); Ard Huizing and Jan van der Wal, 'Explaining the Rise and Fall of the Warez MP3 Scene: An Empirical Account from the Inside', *First Monday,* 19.10 (2014), <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/- 5546/4125> [accessed 11 November 2016]; and Alf Rehn, 'The Politics of Contraband: The Honor Economies of the Warez Scene', *Journal of Socio-Economics*, 33.3 (2004), 359–74 (p. 365).

[4] See Virginia Crisp, 'Access and Power: Film Distribution, Re-intermediation and Piracy', in *The Routledge Companion to the World Cinema*, ed. by Rob Stone, Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison and others (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 445–54; Virginia Crisp, 'Pirates and Proprietary Rights: Perceptions of "Ownership" and Media Objects within Filesharing Communities' in *Cult Media: Re-packaged, Re-released and Restored*, ed. by Andy Willis and Jonathan Wroot (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017), pp. 125–41; Virginia Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age: Pirates and Professionals* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015); Virginia Crisp, 'To Name A Thief: Constructing the Deviant Pirate', in *Piracy: Leakages from Modernity*, ed. by Martin Fredriksson and James Arvanitakis (Los Angeles, CA: Litwin Books, 2014), pp. 39–54; Virginia Crisp, 'The Piratical is Political: Why We Should All (Still) Pay Attention to Debates about Piracy', *Soundings*, 55 (Autumn 2013), pp. 71–80; Virginia Crisp, 'BLOODY PIRATES!!! *shakes fist*': Re-imagining East Asian Film Distribution & Reception through Online Filesharing Networks', *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, 3.1 (2012), 65–72.

media supply to the aforementioned distribution outlets: newsgroups, private filesharing communities, tracker sites, DDL sites, streaming sites and filesharing software. However, it should be noted that because the structure and operations of online informal distribution practices vary between mediums, it has been necessary to use one medium, film, as the focus for the model. This is because it was deemed that a single model attempting to capture the interactions within the online informal distribution across mediums would become too complex to helpfully illustrate the key role that the Scene plays within this ecosystem. This article will begin with a discussion of what the Scene is and how it operates before presenting the aforementioned model illustrating how the Scene interacts with other aspects of informal online distribution of films.

What is The Scene?

Décary-Hétu, Morselli and Leman-Langois suggest that '[w]hile it is true that some of the warez [files circulated informally online] come from individuals who have shared their personal collections, current research on the phenomenon has shown that there exists a community of hackers who are specializing in the removal of copy-protection schemes and distribution of copyrighted material'.[5] Thus, the 'Scene', often written in title case and/or with inverted commas, has become a collective title for numerous self-identified 'release groups' who remove copyright protection from media artefacts (e.g. games, software, films) and repackage them into 'releases' for distribution online. According to Eriksson, these '"release groups" […] who assemble under the umbrella grid of the "scene" [represent] a highly diverse underground sphere from which most pirate copies originate'.[6]

Huizing and van der Wal, suggest that pirate 'scenes' (in the plural) first developed in the 1980s and (at this point) these scenes were primarily concerned with the informal distribution of computer software and games.[7] These scenes originally evolved because the process of online informal distribution was, and in some cases still is, expensive and laborious and thus collaborating with others enabled copyright protected content to be circumvented and files to be circulated with greater speed and ease. As Huizing and van der Wal suggest, 'In the early days of the MP3 scene, ripping, releasing and distributing a MP3 file was a time–consuming and knowledgeable activity, prone to mistakes and duplicate work that required a joint effort of many different sceners.'[8] While the situation is arguably very different now, especially in relation to MP3 circulation, the early costs in terms of money, time and experience explain why a scene

[5] Décary-Hétu, Morselli and Leman-Langois, p. 360.
[6] Eriksson, p. 92.
[7] Huizing and van der Wal, p 10.
[8] Huizing and van der Wal, p. 4.

developed around online piracy where people collaborated in order to release certain materials.

Scenes within the Scene

However, from these early beginnings, these scenes became what Huizing and van der Wal have referred to as a 'global microstructure', that is, 'forms of connectivity and coordination that combine global reach with microstructural mechanisms that instantiate self-organizing principles and patterns'.[9] In this way, they suggest, 'the MP3 scene soon developed into the primary provider of most pirated artefacts on the Internet.'[10] Within the Scene's microstructure there are innumerable release groups and each of these groups tends to specialise in a particular medium, format and/or genre. So, one might have release groups that variously specialise in Kung-Fu Blu-rays or Vinyl RnB. Décary-Hétu, Morselli and Leman-Langois suggest that overall these release groups 'work and compete in a very distributed and democratic community where we are unable to identify clear leaders'.[11] However, while the Scene overall is distributed and de-centralised, the release groups within it are 'hierarchical, highly-structured organisations with leadership positions that control day-to-day operations, recruit new members and manage the group's various computer archive sites'.[12] Thus, on the one hand, the Scene is highly organised because it operates with its own rules and standards (which will be examined in more detail later in this article) but on the other hand 'a large proportion of release groups are short lived' and 'no actor or actors significantly dominate [the overall] network'.[13]

As well as the release groups that make up the Scene, it is important to note that the blanket term 'the Scene' includes the varying *scenes* that specialise in the redistribution of software, films, music, audiobooks and other media and thus, there are numerous *sub*-scenes within this larger structure. These scenes are related in that, they are all concerned with informal distribution, they are all made up of smaller release groups, and each scene has its own rules and conventions (which have commonalities but are nonetheless distinct). Furthermore, the portals through which others might access each scene's releases may converge (e.g. one might download both music and films via the same filesharing software or DDL sites) although this is not always the case. However, due to specialisation within scenes and release groups, there is not necessarily an *actual* overlap between people who are members of each scene. Such a situation might be likened to

[9] Huizing and van der Wal, p. 1.
[10] Ibidem.
[11] Décary-Hétu, Morselli and Leman-Langois, p. 360.
[12] Peggy E. Chaudhry, 'The Looming Shadow of Illicit Trade on the Internet', *Business Horizons*, 60.1 (2017), 77–89 (p. 83).
[13] Décary-Hétu, Morselli and Leman-Langois, p. 371.

when a city has a thriving live music scene but the gigs and performances within that wider scene, and thus the audiences, would likely differ. For instance, it is unlikely that those who perform at RnB club nights would be the same as those participating in singer songwriter folk jams but they are nonetheless still connected by their status as music performers within the same geographical location — and thus the same live music scene. In a similar manner, the Scene has no centre, it is full of contradictions, and its boundaries are far from clear.

In order to delineate this interconnected yet decentralised Scene, the following section will examine the repository of information regarding Scene rules across mediums and formats provided on scenerules.org in order to demonstrate just how many different factions operate within the Scene and their multiple attempts to standardise their decentralised practises.

The website scenerules.org presents numerous sets of rules that have been devised by one or more release groups in an effort to standardise how their scene creates and distributes 'releases'. For instance, 'The 2014 Complete Bluray Releasing Standards' signed by release groups: BAKED, BDA, CiNEMATiC, GMB, Japhson, LAZERS, NOSCREENS, o0o, PCH, & SEMTEX, provide specific guidelines on how releases should be packaged and tagged named as well as general rules specifying that releases must be region free, that all copy protection should be removed and that watermarks should *not* be used by release groups. Their rules regarding packaging are as follows:

P1) Sample, nfo and sfv are required for each release.
P2) NFO must contain at least:
– IMDB link
– Bluray Region
– Audio streams
– Subtitle streams
P3) Rar's must be split into 250 or 500 MB archives.
P4) Passwords or encryption is not tolerated.
P5) Compression is not allowed.[14]

As the text above illustrates, these rules are clear and specific and language such as 'is not allowed' or 'is not tolerated' implies these rules will be actively policed by the release groups who are signatories to the rules.

The site categorises the rules they make available under headings of 'Current English Rules', 'Ye Olde English Rules' and 'Non-English Rules'. The multiple rule sets are available to view in picture, text or numbered formats or as downloadable .NFO[15] files. Non-English Rules are categorised under Baltic, Danish, Dutch, Flemish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian,

[14] The 2014 Complete Bluray Standards <https://scenerules.org/n.html?id=2014_BLURAY.nfo/> [accessed 23 October, 2017].
[15] The term NFO refers to 'text files that are attached to digital pirate copies, and offer additional information about them'. See Eriksson, p. 94.

Polish, Spanish and Swedish headings. The Baltic, Danish and Flemish headings only contain one or two sets of rules each whereas, in contrast, the German section has forty separate sets of rules that relate to different mediums (ebooks, TV, scripts) as well as different input (Bluray, TV) and output (DVDR, XViD, Divx) formats. Some of the non-English rules date back to 2001 while others are as recent as 2017. The 'Ye Olde English Rules' are split by input and output format (e.g. Audiobook, FLAC, PS3 etc.) with certain categories (DVDR, Games, MDVDR, MP3, MVID, TV, X264, Xbox 360 and XViD) having more than one set of rules. This section has a total of 125 different sets of rules recorded.[16] There is also an extra '0 Day' section which lists rules for software that is 'released' on the same day as the official release. The earliest set of rules within the 'Ye Olde' section has MP3 rules dating back to 1996. The 'Current English Rules' section represents a consolidation of the earlier rules into forty-two rule sets that are split by format/medium but in this case, there are no longer multiple rules sets for a single format/medium and these rules are presented as the current sets to be followed by Scene release groups.

In total, scenerules.org provides details of two hundred and seventy-seven separate rule sets over multiple mediums and formats. Rules are provided for anything from press books, album covers and audiobooks to PS3 and Wii-U games. Furthermore, each rule set points to a number of release groups that have devised and 'signed' those rules as well as implying the existence of numerous other groups who will adhere to the rules without being signatories. Such a plethora of different rule sets and release groups points to a markedly decentralised and fluid organisational structure, which, scholars such as Rehn have noted, mean that 'the scene cannot be said to exist in anything except a virtual sense. Participants only rarely meet in person, and in most cases know each other solely as "network identities" [...]. It is, in all senses, a virtual, distributed society'.[17] While the existence on so may rules points to an element of self-regularisation, Eriksson suggests that this apparent organisation really amounts to little more than 'an untidy bureaucratic framework for the production of digital pirate copies'.[18]

Furthermore, while the Scene is dedicated to practices of online piracy, it is, perhaps counterintuitively, staunchly opposed to peer-to-peer filesharing listing websites like *The Pirate Bay* who frequently circulate Scene materials. As Andrew Whelan suggests:

> Warez groups consider p2p users to be leeches jeopardising their own activity — at the same time that they are dependent on p2p users to spread their name alongside the releases they (re)produce. The sources of much of the content on p2p are actively

[16] It should be noted that two of these records are marked as potentially fake as they are unsigned by the named release groups.
[17] Rehn, p. 364.
[18] Eriksson, p. 96.

opposed to the distribution of that content; the warez scene attitude towards p2p is not all that different from that of the RIAA.[19]

So, while the files from the Scene 'simmer out to the general public through websites and similar avenues, the community itself is rather closed and abides by its own logic'.[20] This is further illustrated by a 2009 article on the filesharing news site *TorrentFreak* which reports that while being questioned during a court case, one of the co-founders of the *Pirate Bay*, Gottfird Svartholm (AKA Anakata), explained that, 'so-called warez groups […] hate the Pirate Bay [because] they like to keep their releases within a selective group of people'.[21] Despite this wish to stay selective and keep their warez circulating within their own sharing sites and closed communities, Scene releases do seep out of the confines of these spaces and it is the influence of these leakages that will be illustrated in the model of the online informal distribution ecology outlined later in this article.

Having examined the dispersed and contradictory nature of the Scene, this article will now begin to examine how these Scene(s) function through a closer examination of what some of these Scene rules are as well as how they have been developed and formalised.

Scene Releasing: Standards, Practices & Policing

Drawing from Huizing and van der Wal[22] and Rehn[23], the process of Scene releasing can be distilled into the following stages: firstly, a release group sources a copy of the film, album or piece of software they wish to share. These copies might be provided by industry insiders or the release might be copied from a legitimate purchase. Next, the release group checks the Scene database to make sure the group is not about the make a duplicate of an existing Scene release. After this, this source file is 'ripped' from its original version and copyright protection is also thus removed. This 'rip' must adhere to certain Scene rules that dictate the way the 'release' must be 'packaged'. For instance, Scene rules dictate how the file will be named and what other information must accompany each release. This normally consists of providing up to date metadata (e.g. MP3 tags), 'applying a Simple File Verification (.SFV) to verify

[19] Andrew Whelan, 'Leeching Bataille: Peer-to-Peer Potlatch and the Acephalic Response', in *4th Inclusiva-net Meeting: P2P Networks and Processes*, ed. by J. Prada (Madrid: Medialab Prado, 2009), pp. 1–15 (p. 6).
[20] Rehn, p. 363.
[21] Ernesto, 'Anakata Explains in Court How "The Scene" Works', *TorrentFreak*, 20 February 2009 <https://torrentfreak.com/anakata-explains-in-court-how-the-scene-works-090220/> [accessed 11 November 2016].
[22] Huizing and van der Wal.
[23] Rehn.

the file's integrity and including a .NFO file for contact details and credits' for the release group.[24]

Release standards for Scene rips of films first came to the fore when Team Div/X aka DVX published their guidelines[25] and early MP3 releases were standardised by the rather grandly titled MP3 Council. When examining these early release standards, Eriksson notes how these standards for film dictated 'a minimum resolution and bitrate, a maximum file size' alongside guidance for producing 'so-called .NFO-files to pirate copied films' as well as specifying naming conventions.[26] In music the situation was similar, with requirements to encode at a certain bitrate, use an 'approved MP3 encoder' and provide an .NFO file, which needed to contain information about the release group. The creation of the DVX group rules was followed by a proliferation of alternative release standards. According to information on scenerules.org that was last updated in February 2017, forty-two release standards are still currently in use and many more previous standards have faded into obscurity.[27]

These rules thus demonstrate how the Scene is not confined to particular mediums or formats but that these subdivisions have their own specific regulations. That said, a common convention to all rule sets is the requirement that the name of the released file includes the name of the release group, as illustrated by the Official FLAC Standard Rules v3.0, which state that a '[r]elease name MUST contain at least: Artist, Title, Source, Year, Group'.[28] Thus, far from eschewing notoriety due to the illegality of their activities, such naming conventions point to the way release groups are required to mark releases as their own work.

Thus, release standards, as well as representing the Scene's own practices of self-regulation, also act as 'competitive yardsticks' against which pirate materials might be judged and valued; thus engendering a culture of competition amongst release groups.[29] Rehn has suggested that this competition focus within the Scene means that what is released becomes secondary to the perceived speed and technical ability of the release groups.[30] As he claims, 'by and large, the specifics of what is released are less important than the act of releasing itself.'[31] Significantly, motivations for participating in the Scene are generally held to be reputational rather than monetary. In this context, preparing a release 'before another group' becomes particular respected and so '[g]roups will cooperate when it comes to the upkeep of the community's infrastructure (servers and

[24] Huizing and van der Wal, p. 4.
[25] See the Scenerules website <https://scenerules.org/> [accessed 29 July 2017]
[26] Eriksson, p. 94.
[27] Scenerules <https://scenerules.org/> [accessed 29 July 2017]
[28] Official FLAC Standard Rules v3.0 <https://scenerules.org/n.html?id=2016_FLAC.nfo> [accessed 23 October 2017]
[29] Erikkson, p. 93.
[30] Rehn, p. 368.
[31] Rehn, p. 366.

connections), but compete in the production and distribution of products within this infrastructure'.[32]

Furthermore, 'these rule sets have a significant impact on how digital pirate copies are shaped, formed, and packaged — and also how they later come to circulate in the world […]. Much like quality ensuring mechanisms within the market economy, they [release standards] help to separate grain from husk and thus exert power over the future movements of digital pirate copied objects'.[33] This is because the 'rules' dictate certain norms of behaviour. For instance, a notable aspect of the DVX rules is an emphasis on *only* releasing new titles. Such a rule inevitably skews the titles that circulate online.

After the release has been packaged according to Scene rules it will be uploaded to a Scene server — commonly called a topsite. At this point further checking for duplicates would take place. Again, specific rules exist about duplicates and crediting the work of other release groups. For instance, once a product is released by one group is cannot be redistributed without crediting the initial group or the duplicating group may be expelled from the Scene.[34] Due to the aforementioned organisational structure of the Scene, while a particular group or individual might be banded, there is potentially little to stop the group producing releases under another name or for the group's members joining or forming other groups. However, if found, duplicates are 'nuked' (i.e. deleted) from Scene servers and thus release groups have little incentive to duplicate releases. After this final duplicate check, the 'release' is distributed on servers affiliated with the Scene before being sent out to non-affiliated servers by couriers.

The Scene and the Informal Online Distribution Ecology

This elucidation of Scene release processes should now serve as a baseline from which to consider how the Scene might fit within the wider informal online distribution ecology. To examine this question, Huizing and van der Wal's model for informal online distribution activities will be considered. This model suggests that the Scene exists separately to private torrents, newsgroups and peer-to-peer networks and that those within the Scene typically spend more time distributing content online than those in other categories (fig. 1).[35]

Huizing and van der Wal's model is also designed to reflect their argument that Sceners 'collaborated in groups with a strong sense of We-ness';[36] in other words, collaborative behaviour is prized and there is an emphasis on community

[32] Rehn, p. 367.
[33] Eriksson, p. 96.
[34] David Décary-Hétu, 'Police Operations 3.0: On the Impact and Policy Implications of Police Operations on the Warez Scene', *Policy and Internet*, 6.3 (2014), 315–40 (p. 318).
[35] Huizing and van der Wal, p. 8.
[36] Huizing and van der Wal, p. 7.

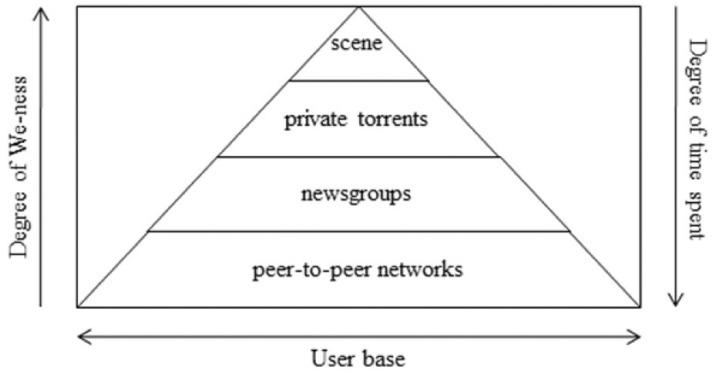

Fig. 1. Huizing and van der Wal's model for informal online distribution activities.

engagement and furthering the mutually shared goal of distributing content online. This 'we-ness' exists, Huizing and van der Wal suggest, in contrast to Private torrents, newsgroups and peer-to-peer networks, within which there is an emphasis on downloading rather than uploading.[37] However, arguably this model is only useful to the extent that it indicates that the Scene is somewhat collaborative and that it has a much smaller user base than peer-to-peer networks. Furthermore, this model does little to illustrate the relationships *between* these informal distribution groups. To address these issues and to illustrate the relationship between the Scene and other aspects of the informal distribution ecology the following model is proposed (fig. 2).

This model is designed to communicate: firstly, the multiple sources for the releases that circulate online as well as the relatively small number of distributors who select and package them; secondly, the relationship between the Scene and other informal online distributors; and thirdly, the interactions between informal online distributors and various access portals, e.g. torrent listing websites and filesharing software. As was noted in the introduction, the informal distribution of *film alone* has been used as an example medium to illustrate the various sources of these original files but similar lists could be complied for other media.

The top part of the diagram perhaps requires the least explanation and illustrates that pirate copies originate from both formal (streaming, home video, TV, cinema, non-theatrical) and informal (screeners, work prints, pirate copies) sources. The distributors level of the diagram (the Scene, Intermediary Distributors, Autonomous Distributors), on the other hand, requires further elucidation.

These categorisations are drawn from distinctions made in previous work between 'informal online distributors' who operate within Scene release groups (labelled in fig. 2 as 'The Scene'), 'intermediary distributors' who circulate

[37] Ibidem.

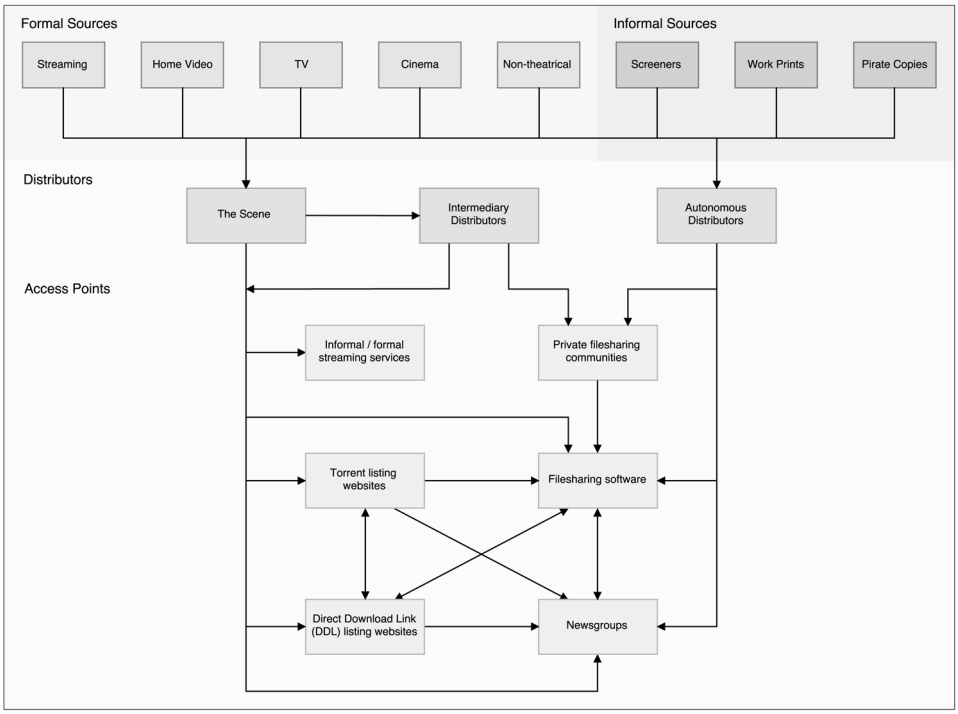

Fig. 2. A model of the relationship between the Scene and other aspects of the informal distribution ecology.

Scene releases through non-Scene networks, and 'autonomous distributors' who prepare releases for specific communities/platforms without being affiliated to the Scene or necessarily following Scene conventions.[38] A sub-set of these autonomous distributors might be understood as what Hinduja has described as 'amateur distributors', i.e. 'individuals who randomly upload copyrighted content on peer-to-peer networks'.[39] That is, these individuals might have files on their computer that they have ripped themselves and by virtue of storing them in certain folders on their hard-drive and using certain software they are incidentally 'sharing' the files, but they did not consciously decide to rip the files for such a purpose.[40] This amateur activity is less deliberate and purposeful that

[38] Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age.*
[39] Sameer Hinduja, 'Neutralization Theory and Online Software Piracy: An Empirical Analysis', *Ethics and Information Technology*, 9.3 (2007), 187–204, cited in Décary-Hétu, Morselli and Leman-Langois, p. 363.
[40] This form of amateur distribution is most common with music due to the relative technical simplicity of the conversion process from CD to MP3 in comparison to film, software or games which typically require specialist technical knowledge and software in order to circumvent copyright protection and extract files from a particular format (e.g. a Blu-ray disk) and to convert the files into another format (e.g. .avi).

the actions of autonomous distributors who operate in a similar way to release groups but who also tend to work individually, prepare releases for specific communities, and do not necessarily adhere to set release standards.

Scene release groups, autonomous distributors and amateur distributors are all 'distributors' in as much as they are *adding* to the pool of films available through filesharing networks as opposed to simply circulating files that were already there. The exception to this is the category of 'intermediary' distributors which, as mentioned, involves the purposeful act of sharing of Scene releases within specific communities (and thus an element of choice and acquisition takes place) but the release itself, while being more widely distributed by the actions of the intermediary distributor, is *not broadening* the library of files available through informal online channels.

Finally, and most significantly, the diagram illustrates the way files flow from distributors to access portals (private filesharing communities, torrent listing websites, filesharing software, direct download link [DDL] listing websites, streaming sites & newsgroups) and *between* those different portals and the key role that the Scene plays in feedings all of those access points. The access portals identified here are mechanisms through which 'warez' can be downloaded by consumers. These vary in terms of their histories and current usage.[41] Newsgroups, for instance, were very popular during the early days of informal online distribution but have arguably waned in significance at the time of writing this article.[42] Torrent listing websites, e.g. The Pirate Bay, are in some senses still very popular but they are also the more high-profile of the access portals and thus tend to exist in a cycle of being shut down by authorities before being relocated, then they are shut down again, and relocated again, and the cycle continues. What is significant in the diagram is not the existence of these multiple portals but the interactions *between* these access points. For instance, filesharing software and newsgroups tend to be endpoints where files are distributed having been sourced from elsewhere. Direct download link (DDL) and torrent listing websites reciprocally feed each other while private torrent communities tend to be somewhat disconnected from the rest of the informal ecology.

Conclusion

While the breath of Scene practices and their intersections with the broader informal online distribution ecology could not be comprehensibly covered within this article, two important conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, as illustrated by the model outlined in this article, the Scene plays a pivotal role in feeding *all* of the access points within the informal distribution ecology, reflecting the assertions

[41] These variations cannot be dealt with sufficiently within the confines of this article, see Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age*, for a more detailed history.
[42] With the exception, perhaps, of Usenet which continues to have a dedicated user base.

of Eriksson,[43] Huizing and van der Wal,[44] Rehn,[45] Décary-Hétu, Décary-Hétu, Morselli and Leman-Langois[46] that the Scene is the source of 'most' pirate copies circulating online. In this context, the role these online gatekeepers play in selecting what is 'released' into unauthorized online distribution networks needs to be more thoroughly explored.

Secondly, we need to be particularly concerned about the influential gatekeeping role that the Scene plays within informal online distribution networks and, as such, the role of rules and release standards in influencing what the Scene releases requires greater scrutiny. These release standards arguably foster a defining logic of competition within the Scene and, as such, the particulars and use value of what these release groups actually, crack/rip/release/package and circulate has the potential to become almost irrelevant. So '[a]lthough a release is expected to function (in fact this is necessary for a release to count in the internal system of appraisal), whether or not it is actually used for anything is of little or no interest to how the release is valued within the community'.[47] In this manner the Scene is a community engaged in 'conspicuous production'[48] (where the monetary, aesthetic or use value of what they circulate is of limited internal relevance) and thus the role it plays in controlling the pipeline of content to the rest of the informal distribution ecology must be examined in more detail.

[43] Eriksson, p. 92.
[44] Huizing and van der Wal, p. 1.
[45] Rehn, p. 365.
[46] Décary-Hétu, Morselli and Leman-Langois, p. 363
[47] Rehn, p. 368.
[48] Rehn, p. 370.